

Using Gramsci

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A New Approach

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Introduction

Those who do not produce things (in the wide sense) cannot produce words.

Antonio Gramsci

1912

In 1987, Eric J. Hobsbawm wrote an article for the Italian journal *Rinascita*, informing readers that Antonio Gramsci was among “The 250 most cited authors in the Arts and Humanities Citations Index 1976–1983.”¹ Together with Gramsci, this ranking, which included famous names from the sixteenth century onwards, only included another four Italians: Giorgio Vasari, Giuseppe Verdi, Benedetto Croce and Umberto Eco. Gramsci died on 27 April 1937, and his fame was very much of a posthumous nature, starting at the end of the Second World War with the publication of the thematic volumes of his prison writings.² So, what exactly happened during the thirty-year period from the late 1940s to the end of the 1970s? Well, during that period a leading political figure, the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, who had been imprisoned by the Fascist regime and had subsequently died just a few days after his release, became not only a leading intellectual figure for the international left and for critical thought in general, but also a classic in political theory.³ This success was influenced in particular by the political-cultural atmosphere in Europe and the USA during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as by an intense period of anti-colonial and emancipation movements in the rest of the world. During this period, Gramsci’s writings were divulged to the four corners of the world, in the wake of the publication of a famous anthology of the *Prison Notebooks* in English (SPN). This initial phase of the internationalization of Gramsci’s thought was characterized by the explicit political use of his writings within the context of emancipatory struggles that were quite different from the struggles Gramsci himself had been involved in: struggles against Latin American dictatorships, against colonial regimes in Asia and Africa, for civil rights in Europe and the USA and also in favour of Eurocommunism.

This initial phase has since been accompanied by a second phase coinciding with the start of the new millennium.⁴ In the last fifteen years, in fact, there has been a strong revival of interest in Gramsci's work, thus marking a strong reversal in the trend that had characterized the final twenty years of the previous millennium. This second wave of interest appears not only more substantial, but also of a more far-reaching nature than the previous one. It has proven capable of reaching the most varied of cultural contexts and disciplines. While the first phase was characterized by its evocation of the historical experience of international communism, aided by the hagiography of the martyr of the Fascist regime, and based on the attempt to identify a version of socialism different from that of the USSR, the second phase has been distinguished by a less constrained approach to Gramsci's historical experience. The focus this time around has been on the use of Gramscian concepts within various disciplines, in particular in the social sciences. Although this has at times led to interpretations and 'uses' of Gramsci's writings of a somewhat misleading or little documented nature, and the arbitrary disengagement of his concepts from the Marxist and materialist sphere in which they were forged, nevertheless in the majority of cases the 'political character' of Gramsci's writings, together with their emancipatory and critical spirit, have been largely preserved.

The new approach to Gramsci's work adopted in the present volume is set within the context of this 'shifted' use of Gramsci's theoretical instruments in a broad range of disciplines (political science, education and pedagogy, language, cultural studies, international relations, subaltern and postcolonial studies, anthropology, geography). The present is an attempt to provide scholars of these disciplines with an interpretation of Gramsci's writings offering a precise historical/theoretical reconstruction that is, however, devoid of all the esoteric features that normally characterize a restricted and specific community of scholars. Hence, the decision to organize the book into a number of chapters, each of which is dedicated to a specific key theme, which at first sight may not appear to reflect the traditional instruments of Gramscian analysis, but which on the contrary refer to the central questions of political and social thought: ideology, the individual, collective organisms, society, crisis and temporality. Gramsci's conceptuality, consisting of a series of well-known formulas – passive revolution, historical bloc, hegemony etc. –, is in the end based around these key themes, and will be analysed within this context. In contemporary debate, Gramsci's concepts are in

danger of being diluted to such an extent that they are no longer useful, on the one hand, and of remaining hostage to the historical circumstances that produced them, on the other hand. To get around the first of these two problems, Gramscian discourse needs to be reconnected to the large-scale changes taking place at the time he wrote; however, in order to resolve the second problem, said discourse needs to be rendered available, as all classics, to contemporary analysis, which sees the present characterized by different, but nonetheless epoch-making, changes.

An indication of this kind was offered by Gramsci himself when he wrote that the ‘Search for the *Leitmotiv*, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms.’⁵ As rightly claimed by Alberto Burgio – a meticulous scholar who can afford to adopt this approach to Gramsci’s writings without risking the philologists’ ire – what is felt here is ‘the genuine concern that an overly respectful reader may prove the least well equipped to understand. Gramsci is aware of the paradox whereby the actual fetishism of writings may, in the case of the *Prison Notebooks*, produce perverse effects, causing the author to be attributed with positions and thoughts that in reality may be the exact opposite of those actually held.’⁶ One of the aims of this new approach is thus to follow the rhythm of Gramscian thought, and to provide a solid basis for those wishing to utilize his categories in the fields of sociology, political science and the social sciences in general. The path followed is somehow in an upward direction, from the individual to society, although the central theoretical problems remain the same, all of which are linked to the changes brought by the advent of mass politics, which had generated ‘social governance’ needs previously unheard of. Looked at from this point of view – that of a mass, politicized society – Gramsci reformulated the Marxist vocabulary of his time, and one century later has provided us with a conceptual toolkit that can be used to understand the contemporary crisis of a world that Gramsci himself had witnessed emerging.

1

Ideology

Ideologies must become dramas if they are not to remain mere ink printed on paper.

Antonio Gramsci
13 October 1917

THE PROBLEM OF IDEOLOGY

In his study of ideology, Michael Freeden cites Karl Mannheim, Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci as the three twentieth-century figures who made the greatest contribution to the broadening of our understanding of ideology. According to Freeden, their merit ‘was that they transformed our conception of ideology from the transient epiphenomenon Marx and Engels had made it out to be into a permanent feature of the political.’¹ This view, whilst perhaps somewhat reductive in regard to Marxian writings, nevertheless grasps a fundamental advancement witnessed in the social sciences during the first half of the twentieth century. It is not surprising that the disciplines that suffered this ‘ideological tribulation’ were in fact those ascribable to the aforementioned three figures: that is, sociology, philosophy and political theory.

In the case of sociology, the transition from a purely instrumental conception of ideology to the establishment of a specific field of study regarding the formation of ideas – the sociology of knowledge – was completed without too much difficulty.² In the case of philosophy, the process proved more uneven, and ended up grinding to a standstill when the attempt was made to interpret the effects and structure of ideology in a ‘constructive manner’, by considering ideology as a constantly coherent expression of social totality. In this case, the gap between ideological forms and economic structure was bridged, and ideology was reduced to the status of an objective function of the system.³ Finally, in the case of political theory, the transition to a more complex conception of ideology was attempted only occasionally, and in fact Gramsci remains, almost a

century later, the main source of ideas for those wishing to deal with the question from a non-reductionist Marxist point of view.⁴

Gramsci agrees with, or rather pre-empts, the Althusserian view of ideology as an organic part of a social totality (Gramsci's 'historical bloc'), whilst at the same time maintaining the flexibility of the concept, so that he can consider ideological, on the one hand, the disjointed *sensu comune*⁵ that is not aimed at, or functional to, any specific historical bloc a priori; and, on the other hand, philosophy, which is, in fact, in keeping with, and functional to, political domination. The various levels of ideology that Gramsci analyses – common sense, folklore, religion, philosophy (and science in part) – can thus be arranged according to a scale of internal consistency, where common sense and philosophy represent the extremes of such a scale. This scale, as we shall see, coincides with the level of consciousness of the bearer of this ideological thought system. In Gramsci's view, the knowledge, understanding and development of these ideological elements represent the core of revolutionary political theory.

This approach to the formation of historical subjects – and thus to the various ideological forms that distinguish such – reveals Gramsci's conviction that the historical bloc underlying each type of domination never derives mechanically from the morphological structure of society, but is, on the contrary, the result of the composition of elements that may be arranged in various different ways.

In order to deal with this tangle of problems, however, we need to first examine the context within which Gramsci wrote, and the level of debate on ideology at that time. His *Prison Notebooks* were written in the early 1930s, in a period in history that had only recently witnessed the introduction of the concept of ideology into the political vocabulary.

THE HISTORICITY OF THE CONCEPT OF IDEOLOGY

The first evidence of Gramsci's interest in defining ideology can be found in a note from Notebook 4, in which he muses on the origin of the concept:

'Ideology' is an aspect of 'sensationalism', that is, of the eighteenth-century French materialism. It used to mean 'science of ideas', and since analysis was the only method recognized and applied by science, it meant 'analysis of ideas', that is, also, 'search for the origin of ideas'.

Ideas had to be broken down into their <original> ‘elements’, which could be nothing other than ‘sensations’.⁶

From here, Gramsci goes back to the definition of ideology formulated by Destutt de Tracy, whom he considered to be the ‘literary propagator of ideology [...], among the most renowned and popular, because of the ease of his exposition.’⁷ In Tracy’s original design, ideology is a genuine ‘political science of the social’,⁸ the aim of which is to deal scientifically with the new field of study that actually has emerged with the advent of the French Revolution. The science that is to operate in this new field of study must provide answers to the questions: how are the ideas formed of those free, equal, fraternal individuals who, no longer being subjected to traditional or personal powers, produce ideas that are no longer foreseeable? What impact do such ideas have on the political order, and how can their effects be foreseen? In this case, the basis for the scientific study of ideas and their formation was laid by the historical circumstance that permitted such ideas to be ‘freed’ from their original, constant subjugation to traditional powers. That which, after 1789, became unforeseeable for such traditional powers, which up until then had regulated the formation of ideas, could become predictable for a science.

Thus, Gramsci was aware of the transformation that the concept had undergone, and he immediately displayed a strong awareness of its historicity. In truth, it was the very semantic and political evolution of the term following the post-revolutionary watershed that Gramsci was interested in, that is, ‘How did the meaning of “ideology” change from “science of ideas” and the search for the origins of ideas, to “a system of ideas?”’⁹ We know that this transition took place very early in the history of the concept, in a period somewhere between Napoleon’s famous attack on the *Idéologues* and the emergence of Marxist criticism,¹⁰ which Gramsci saw as a ‘distinct advance [*superamento*]’¹¹ on sensationalism. But if ‘In logical terms, the process is easy to understand – Gramsci continued –, how did it come about historically?’¹² Gramsci’s interest in this transition already marks an important point: ideology had followed a rapid process of formation, politicization and, finally, criticism, as a result of the historical process triggered by the French Revolution. Therefore, it did not possess any independent character, since it was modelled on its own connections with historical-political events. Thanks to historical

materialism, ideology thus took the form of the political element of the superstructure, to be analysed from a historical perspective.

The distinction between the two meanings of the term is indicated in the *Prison Notebooks* by the use, or otherwise, of the capital 'I'. The science of ideas, the capitalized 'Ideology' of the *Idéologues* and of Tracy, is the science of a physiological nature that studies the formation of ideas on the basis of their derivation from sensations;¹³ 'ideology' with a small 'i', on the other hand, refers to the system of ideas that each person possesses, which does not depend on physiological causes but on historical-political ones.

In this latter meaning of ideology, the concept becomes a vast analytical terrain that in the *Prison Notebooks* is broadened and specified to constitute a multitude of further concepts, whilst at the same time revealing an area of theoretical engagement in which debate rages over ideology's independence or dependence, its cognitive richness or its mystifying aspects, the rigidity it entails or the movement it stimulates. In fact, while the *Prison Notebooks* also features a non-specific use of the *term* – often with 'ideological' employed as a negative adjective – there are also signs of a knowing, albeit incomplete, construction of an independent *concept* of ideology on Gramsci's part.¹⁴ This process of construction begins with Gramsci distancing his analysis from two other attempts made to do likewise within the Marxist field: Bukharin's venture to provide Marxism with a sociology, and a theory of ideology based on this sociology; and that of the so-called 'reflection theories' that perceive ideology as a variable that is closely dependent on the economic structure, thus nullifying its importance from the knowledge point of view.

As far as regards the first of these two attempts, Gramsci's criticism of Bukharin's *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* submitted in Notebook 11,¹⁵ is that this work had remained tied to a concept of ideology similar to the one shared by the *Idéologues*, namely, a science that reconstructs the components of human thought, such components being taken as stable and uniform insofar as they are rooted in people's consciousness and expressed by their common sense. Thus, Gramsci believed that Bukharin 'really capitulated before common sense and vulgar thought, for he did not pose the issue in correct theoretical terms and was therefore practically disarmed and impotent'.¹⁶ The correct theoretical terms, on the other hand, are those of historical materialism, which compared to this meaning of ideology 'represents a

distinct advance [*superamento*] and historically is precisely in opposition to Ideology [capital letter].¹⁷ Marx himself, Gramsci continues, in connoting the concept of ideology negatively, thus attributing a value judgement to it, had pointed out the historical – and thus criticizable – origin of ideas rather than their physiological origin. By linking ideology to historical elements and to social relations, Marx marked a transition, a historical achievement for historical materialism (the philosophy of praxis in Gramsci's vocabulary).

The second Marxist attempt to define ideology that Gramsci criticized was that of the so-called 'reflection theories'. In fact, in the 1920s Gramsci found himself faced with a use of the concept, particularly by Marxists, which, on the one hand, had adopted the originality of the historicity of the 'system of ideas', but which, on the other hand, tended to interpret ideology as mere appearance, that is, as a simple reflection of the economic structure, within a rigid framework that once again renders useless the development of a proper concept, at the very time when the notion of ideology had been freed from its naturalistic origins.¹⁸ Gramsci reacted against this simplification:

For Marx, 'ideologies' are anything but appearances and illusions: they are an objective and operative reality; they just are not the mainspring of history, that's all [...]. Marx explicitly states that humans become conscious of their tasks on the ideological terrain of the superstructures, which is hardly a minor affirmation of 'reality' [...]. This topic of the concrete value of superstructures in Marx should be studied thoroughly. Recall Sorel's concept of the 'historical bloc'. If humans become conscious of their task on the terrain of superstructures, it means that there is a necessary and vital connection between structure and superstructures, just as there is between the skin and the skeleton in the human body. It would be silly to say that a person stands erect on his skin rather than his skeleton, and yet this does not mean that the skin is merely an appearance and an illusion – so much so that the condition of a flayed person is not very pleasant.¹⁹

Reference is being made here to the human organism, something that we shall often encounter in the *Prison Notebooks*, to describe the workings of modern society. For now we are simply going to point out that Gramsci's analogy between the relationship of skeleton to skin, and that of structure to ideology, serves not only to express the mutual inter-

dependence of the pairs of terms, but also alludes to a general systemic function that ideology (like skin) performs within the overall mechanism. There can be no (living) skeleton without skin, and likewise there can be no skin (performing its function) without a skeleton. The two things only operate together, without, however, any necessary hierarchical relationship between them given that both, albeit in different ways, are determined by the presence of the other. This approach thus negates the simplistic vision of ideology as a mere instrument.

THE COMPLEXITY OF IDEOLOGY

A second characteristic of Gramsci's conception of ideology is its complexity. In fact, for Gramsci ideology represents a 'complex form of the social world',²⁰ not only in the sense of 'complicated', but more precisely – and etymologically speaking – in the sense of a non-linear object, composed of different parts and several elements, that depends on various determinations. Thus, ideology in the *Prison Notebooks* cannot be conceived as a unitary moloch, a pre-established, coherent block of ideas and positions, constructed in order to be instilled in the minds of subalterns by intellectuals, ideologists or party officers. On the contrary, in Gramsci's view there are those who are privy to an ideology due to their standing in the world of production, or because of their position in the disjointed world of common sense; there are those who produce ideology from their position as major intellectuals, and those who do so as the 'dominant group's "underlings"'.²¹ There are also those who operate in a manner inconsistent with their own ideology, and thus who express an 'ideology in practice' that is different from that of their words:

The average worker has a practical activity but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his activity in and understanding of the world; indeed, his theoretical consciousness can be 'historically' in conflict with his activity. In other words, he will have two theoretical consciousnesses: one that is implicit in his activity and that really unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the world and a superficial, 'explicit' one that he has inherited from the past. The practical-theoretical position, in this case, cannot help becoming 'political' – that is, a question of 'hegemony'. Consciousness of being part of a hegemonic force (that is, political consciousness) is

the first stage on the way to greater self-awareness, namely, on the way to unifying practice and theory.²²

This citation from Gramsci clearly alludes to the problem of class consciousness and its development. However, one thing that seems to be of a certain importance in this context is the refusal to consider that theoretical consciousness that is inconsistent with its own practice as mere mystification. The elements of this (allegedly false) consciousness, in fact, appear disjointed in common sense; they are the result of the stratification of hegemonic intellectual traditions that have been transcended, producing what Gramsci calls the ‘folklore of “philosophy”’.²³ At certain times these fragments condense and are rearticulated²⁴ to form an integral part of a new historical bloc. A ‘hegemonic force’²⁵ is such when it comprises, and manages to develop for its own purposes, this entire series of ideological ‘remains’.

The true/false model that economic reductionism applies to the ideological sphere is thus replaced by an approach based on the possibility/impossibility of an ideological element being included within a given historical bloc. This possibility/impossibility thus depends on the relationship that is established between two, mobile elements, rather than on the level of consistency of the ‘derived’ term with the ‘immobile’ term. The historical bloc, or rather its specific forms, are thus not determined a priori but depend on how the ideological elements present in society are politically designed (or able) to be combined (and developed).

The political openness of this approach is clear: ideology becomes the battlefield for the conquest of hegemony, whilst Gramsci’s image of the historical bloc replaces the Marxian base/superstructure metaphor. The study, modification and articulation of this stratification of still active ideological remains is the task that the philosophy of praxis must engage in, and also lies at the heart of the concept of ideology that Gramsci attempts to develop in the *Prison Notebooks*:

Obviously, it is impossible to have ‘statistics’ on ways of thinking and on single individual opinions that would give an organic and systematic picture: the only thing possible is the review of the most widely circulated and most popular literature combined with the study and criticism of previous ideological currents, each of which ‘may’ have left a deposit in various combinations with preceding or subsequent deposits. A more general criterion becomes part of